

Passing on good health

By PAM BORDELON

"We learned the game of basketball when we were in our teens. That was 40 years ago and thought we looked just like a queen. Our hair is gray, can't jump too high but we have high esteem! We were overlooked as champions way back in '54. The guys got all the scholarships; we got to sweep the floor... We're back again, hallelujah! To represent to women of today!"

These are just a few verses of the theme song of the Celadrin Tigerettes, a team of women in their 60s and 70s who represent the women of today extremely well. You see, they are the reigning national Senior Olympic women's basketball champions.

All total, the Tigerettes have captured three national championships and an impressive five gold medals.

So, just who are these gals? They are team founder Mavis Albino and Nikki Leader of Denham Springs; Nikki's sister, Wanda Blailock of Jackson, Miss.; Baton Rougean Loretta Hill; Kitty Sparacello of New Orleans; and Mary Bendson of Washington State.

As the song says, they all played basketball in high school but that was before the days of Title IX and the WNBA. Their sports careers basically ended with graduation.

Mavis, who penned the team's theme song, was the first one to take to the court. In 1992, a story in the local paper about the national championship team piqued her interest in playing enough that she called the local Senior Olympics representative.

"I found out they had dropped the age to participate (in Senior Olympics) to 50," says Mavis, who called the leader of that winning team. "She told me to get together a team and scrimmage with her team. I got two of my old high school buddies and we played them."

Mavis and her teammates, which included Kitty, played them well enough that they decided to participate in the upcoming games, eventually capturing that national championship title.

"I have three dreams I've always had," says Mavis, smiling proudly. "One was to play a full-court game, one was to win a national championship and one is to toss the ball for a WNBA game. I've gotten to do two of the three."

Nikki and Wanda joined the Tigerettes in 1997; Loretta in 2000. They signed up Mary, whom they knew from participating in tournaments, when a former teammate retired.

A former high school girls' basketball coach, Nikki is referred to as the team's "fearless leader." But she quickly adds that everyone has input.

"That's what makes this team work," continues Nikki. "We're all so different but we have this one focus."

"We're in it to have fun and stay healthy," says Loretta. "But when we get on the court and that whistle blows, we're all business."



Mavis Albin, Wanda Blailock, Loretta Hill & Nikki Leader, back; Kitty Sparacello & Mary Bendson, front

In fact, the Tigerettes have gained such a reputation with the younger guys who play at the YMCA they now have difficulty finding someone to scrimmage with them before tournaments.

"We're real competitive on the court," says Nikki.

The Tigerettes typically play in a tournament a month. At the international games in Portland, Ore., several years ago, Mavis and Nikki celebrated their birthdays. Among those working security was an FBI agent from Baton Rouge.

"He had a cake made for us in the shape of a basketball," says Mavis. "They rolled it to center court and a gym full of people all sang 'Happy Birthday' to us in their own language."

That's just one of several memorable moments for team members. Loretta's fondest was the 1999 National Championship win in Orlando. They played at the Disney Sports Complex.

"We stood on the podium and they played the National Anthem just like the regular Olympics. It was awesome," she recalls.

Most of the time the Tigerettes play in their age group, 60-64, but they have been known to take on teams younger and older as well as the Harlem Globetrotters in Chicago this past January. They travel to Delaware in April, Connecticut in May and California in June. They are able to do all this traveling because of their sponsor, Celadrin, a natural anti-inflammatory compound.

"It's what keeps us on the court," says Mavis. "I was 55 when I first started playing and I played four games back-to-back. I was so tired when I tried to get out of the car I couldn't pick my feet up. I feel better now (at 70) than I did when I was 55."

"Women our age shouldn't be inactive," continues Nikki. "A little exercise goes a long way."

"That's what we do ... we promote good health," adds Loretta, who is 68. "You need to keep your bones strong - fight osteoporosis. It's never too late to care of yourself."

Considering the Tigerettes didn't get back on the court until they were at least 50-something, this team proves that fact.